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MODERNIZING OUR HIGH SCHOOL LITERATURE
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MODERNIZING OUR HIGH SCHOOL LITERATURE

Before me lies a very old-fashioned English text-book,—Hillard's *FIRST CLASS READER, Consisting of Extracts, in Prose and Verse, with Biographical and Critical Notices of the Authors*, Boston, 1857. The shiny black binding is no more alluring than the title; but a sentence in the preface strikes an appealing note seldom heard in our modern classrooms: "Selections having references, directly or indirectly, to our own country, and informed with the spirit of our own times, have been taken, as a general rule, in preference to others." This program the table of contents in fair measure carries out; of a hundred and twelve authors quoted, fifty were living at the date the book was published, and twenty-seven others had died within the past five, ten, or in a few cases, twenty years. The remaining forty-five authors are sufficiently conservative to give weight to the book,—we find Shakespeare and Spenser, Bacon, Cervantes, Dr. Johnson, and so on,—but the general tone is frankly contemporary. We have Richard Henry Dana, "now a member of the Boston bar"; Oliver Wendell Holmes, "one of the professors in the medical department of Harvard College," whose occasional poems "have been recited before literary societies, and received with very great favor"; Charles Dickens, "the editor of *Household Words*, a weekly periodical published in London, conducted with much ability, and in a generous and enlightened spirit." Clearly, Mr. Hillard felt it his duty to point the way not only to the standard writers of the past, but to the militant writers of the present.

To what extent is our modern teaching of literature in secondary schools "informed with the spirit of our own times"? For better or worse, we must admit that it is hardly so informed at all. The elementary schools recognize contemporary authors; the children's rooms in our better libraries do; but what living author would find his name in the English course of our High Schools? Here and there a teacher will take time from the regular course to read a story of Kipling's aloud; stray copies of the *Atlantic*, or even of less sedate magazines, may find their way to his desk; but these are brief excursions from the macadamized highway of English teaching. We perhaps introduce an essay of Stevenson's,—he has been twenty years dead; but if that does not go well, we fall back with relief on Macaulay, who has been dead half a century, or Addison, who has been dead two centuries. Nobody seems to think of trying Mr. Crothers, or Mr. Chesterton, not to speak of Mr. Dooley.

For this ignoring of present literature, we assign, in public or in the seclusion of our own minds, many reasons. One of the first of

them is the inferiority of contemporary writers. Who would put Mr. Dooley—or even Mr. Chesterton—alongside of Addison! But let us remember that the decay of letters has ever been the universal lament. "There were giants in those days," is caught up and re-phrased in whatever is the literary dialect of each passing generation. But whenever one of our commonplace moderns dies, what a reversal of judgment! I was brought up as a boy with the feeling that Mark Twain, for instance, was not quite a "real author," in the sense in which Irving was a real author; certainly he was never mentioned in school; though that discrimination against him did not prevent my father and me from having some very good times over *Tom Sawyer*. But when Mark Twain died, the notable critics and the literary magazines and the university chairs of literature could find no praise too high for him,—he was our one contributor to world-literature; he out-did "matchless Cervantes." Even if we discount liberally this outburst of enthusiasm, wasn't there enough greatness actually before us for the schools to take a chance on?

Here we reach our secondary line of defense; that nobody knows who the great writers are, till the centuries have rolled past. The failures of contemporary criticism have long been a commonplace. But this commonplace applies only to their failure to detect the kind of greatness which is to endure through the ages. Critics seldom fail to see what is significant for their own time. They may oppose it,—they often do; but they notice it. And this contemporary significance, this vitality however brief, is what carries the very life of literature on from age to age. If *The Spanish Tragedy* had not been popular, we should have had no *Hamlet*; if Bowles had not written, neither, perhaps, would Coleridge. To be sure, it is hard to select wisely; to point out this or that author as significant, among the hundreds who are negligible; but it is better to go ahead even in the dusk than to stand forever at the crossroads.

But there is no end of practical objections to the teaching of contemporary literature. There are vested interests,—stacks of books owned by school committees; copyright restrictions; regiments of English Classics, in their drab or crimson uniforms. Think of the zeal with which publishing houses multiply editions of the same books, with substantially the same editorial equipment; Pocket Classics, English Classics, School Classics; Riverside, Lakeside, Bankside,—all up and down Grub Street. What a needless expense to the publishers; what a burden to the teachers; what a dreary desert of uniformity to the pupils; what educational waste! But suppose the schools were to ask Doubleday and Page for half a dozen of Kipling's best stories; or Harper's, for something from Mark Twain; or Scribner's, for a group of Connolly's sea tales; or the Houghton Mifflin Company for a little book of *Atlantic* essays,—and so on through the whole list of publishing houses. The mere advertising value of these books in the schools would enable publishers to make attractive volumes at a low price,

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(as our Western colleagues are beginning to do) use a standard magazine as a text-book in College or even High School English; when we shall give practical and serious attention to the daily press; when we shall no longer treat *Sir Roger at the Play* as the last word in the art of the short-story; when we shall officially recognize and eagerly study the great movement of our times in the drama,—in short, when we shall consistently treat English as a living language, rather than as a dead one. This does not mean giving up, or minimizing, our great heritage of past literature; on the contrary, the study of earlier literature will become much more vital, just as the study of history is more vital to the student of sociology. There will be in our schools, I hope, more, and not less, reading of the great writings of the past; but there will be less pedantry about it; less gossip about author's lives; less immature philosophizing; less word-juggling; less tracing of literary movements and epochs. Let us leave the study of philology and literary history to the colleges, and pave the way for it by putting before our pupils the literature itself, as a living force; literature of this century, as well as the last; but of whatever century, with a clear realization in our minds and theirs that it lives, for us, only in so far as it is "informed with the spirit of our own times," just as it can live for the future only if informed by the spirit of all time.

ALLAN ABBOTT,

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ANNOUNCEMENT OF HARTFORD MEETING

The editor wishes again to call the attention of members of the Association to the tenth regular fall meeting to be held in Hartford, Conn., Saturday, Dec. 10, at 11 A. M. A copy of the final program is enclosed with this leaflet. It is earnestly hoped that teachers of English in eastern Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and the Connecticut Valley will attend the Hartford meeting in large numbers.

Trains for Hartford, Dec. 10, 1910: From Boston, 8.01 (via Willimantic); from Worcester, 8.40 (via Putnam); from Providence, 7.50 (via Blackstone); from Springfield, 9.20; from New Haven, 9.48; from Middletown, 9.21.

especially since they would be freed from the necessity of duplicating each other's "series," and from the fear of finding their volumes copied by a rival firm as soon as they were printed.

What prevents this happy arrangement? Just one thing,—the Prescribed Books of the National Conference on Uniform Entrance Requirements in English. Such a list is bound by many restrictions, and within these limits, is arrived at by a series of concessions and compromises. It must be adapted to conditions "pretty generally all 'round," and so, like Lowell's Candidate's, is apt, on points in dispute, to be kept "facing South by North." It must not favor any particular publishing house, hence all copyright books are ruled off. The existence, too, of such a list invites the preparation of annotated texts, full of all manner of supplementary information, biographical and explanatory, and these, in turn, make us afraid to venture into the teaching of anything that lacks this equipment. Everybody knows how easy it is to teach notes, instead of literature. The compilers of the List do not, I am sure, mean it to be a millstone about our necks, so much as a flywheel, to keep our erratic and otherwise unsteadied school machinery smoothly and profitably running. And it is but fair to admit that many of us benefit by this steadying influence; that we are hardly to be trusted alone. In fact, we know too little, all of us, of the great forces of current literature. For this we may blame, in part, the conditions under which we work; the premium put, in our profession, on a thorough mastery of things no longer current. We have the right, too, to put some blame on the colleges that train us. They offer courses in "Eighteenth Century Periodicals," but are but just beginning, under the stimulus of newspaper men like Mr. Pulitzer, to consider the problem of modern journalism. Their courses in fiction, modern as that art is, do pretty well if they reach the "publication of *Diana of the Crossways* in 1885." One wonders at the daring with which a course in the drama discusses "finally, with some detail, significant plays of the last twenty-five years." More of this spirit is what we need,—the application of the wisdom learned by study of the past to the conditions of today.

In many departments of scholarship, the change has come. History is no longer what it once was—a rehearsing of deeds or an analysis of legal arrangements long since outlived; it seeks out in the past those elements that are vital to our present life, and attempts to apply them to the wise solution of our political problems. Mathematics is becoming less and less abstract; physics concerns itself more and more with the shop, the motor-car, and the mechanics of the household; modern language teaching, under the leadership of the Prussian reformers, begins not with paradigms, but with the living speech; even so modern a subject as Manual Training is being reformed into Industrial Training. May not some such revolution be ahead, for us, in the teaching of English? I look for the time when we shall bring prominently before our classes the current literary movements and forces; when we shall



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